

# Changing Facets of Myths in Modern Times

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The entire history of human existence has been witnessing men and women who through their endeavour have risen to such great heights that they have become icons or symbols of some or the other values. Such icons or symbols have been attracting writers through ages and much has been written about such icons.

It is evident that male and female icons were created by the Sanatana patriarchal hierarchical Hindu Society. Our fiction writers, generally have been subscribing to this myth and exploiting its possible variants and in doing so have been keeping the myth alive. The woman is mother, taking care of her children, patient, self-sacrificing, abundant in her gifts like the mother earth: the woman is *Grihalaksmi*, symbolising the prosperity of Home: she is *Sahadharmini* identifying herself with the dharma of her husband, her master: she is *Sati*, her life begins and ends with her husband's: she is *Kshetra*, and open field for her master's use; she is *Sakti*, the primal source of energy. The moment the woman is seen to lead her own life, to act in conformity with her own nature and not according to the specifications of the role assigned to her, she loses favour with us, she is damned.

Here is the genesis of the feminine mythical icons. On the basis of different philosophical and religious streams, different rituals and social mores, it may be claimed that there have been two cultures in operation in India: one characterised by *Purusa Pradhanya*, the other by *Prakriti Pradhanya*; in one the cosmic principle is conceived in terms of the male and in the other, in terms of the female. The point is that all social stratifications, and the philosophical abstractions in support of these, derive in the ultimate analysis from the infrastructure, the economic structure. Marx assigns to culture and the philosophical abstractions underlying culture a place in the 'super structure', as distinct and arising from 'economic structure' which is constituted by the 'totality of the relations of Production'.<sup>1</sup> The *Purusa Pradhanya* of the *Sanatana* Hindu Society has its origin in the pastoral economy of the early Vedic people. "The desire for cattle and more cattle," Winternitz tells us, "dominates the Rig Veda: even as late as the times of the *Upanishads*, one finds the sages counting their wealth mainly in terms of the cattle." We are told that 'at the time of the hymns agriculture as yet played only a small part. The chief source of income was cattle rearing, and the chief cattle was the bullock'.<sup>2</sup> One of the recognized characteristics of pastoral economy is the dominant role of the male: cattle rearing, like hunting, belongs to the domain of the male. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, in *Lokayata*, has some significant observations to make on this issue:

"The social importance of the sexes is correlated to the development of the economic life. The original pre-hunting stage was characterised by mother-right. With the development of hunting, however, the social supremacy was shifted to male. In the post-hunting stage, among those peoples that developed the pastoral economy this male supremacy came to exercise even greater hold: among those, however, that discovered agriculture, the situation was reversed. There was revival of mother-right among them."<sup>3</sup>

That explains the male domination of the Vedic thinking. Some of us are quick to recall the Vedic figure of Gargi, and suggest that liberated womanhood is part of our Vedic heritage. It needs to be recognized, however, that the Vedic pantheon is predominantly male. Commentators of Vedic mythology have observed that goddesses occupy a very subordinate position in Vedic belief and worship, their role, compared to the role of the male gods, is insignificant. We have this observation of Max Weber: "The gods of the Vedas are functional and hero gods, externally similar to those of Homer. The Vedic hero is a castle-dwelling, charioteering warring king with a band of Homeric type and with a similar accompaniment of predominantly cattle-breeding yeo-man."<sup>4</sup> The predominantly male constitution of the Vedic pantheon is indicative, in the celestial sphere, of the social supremacy of the male. It appears that this male domination, continued even though its basis of pastoral economy changed. In Brahminism, this male domination came to be aggressively imposed on the lives of the people; Manu debarred the woman from the study of the Vedic scriptures. Our *Sanatana* patriarchal hierarchical Hindu social system absorbed elements of the ideology underlying the Vedic and Upanishadic social formations structure; its thinking, its ideology continued to be male-dominated.

Alongside this long tradition of male-dominated thinking, this culture with the sociological features of *Purusa Pradhanya*, and cutting it at different points there has always been a culture with the sociological features of *Prakriti Pradhanya*, a culture in which some of the elements of mother-right, dating from the pre-vedic social formations still survive. These are the remnants of an early pre-vedic agricultural economy dominated by the female. It will be noticed that the Khasis of Assam --- their economy remains almost wholly agriculture-based --- still retain

the matriarchal pattern, with the woman enjoying social supremacy. Agriculture, since it was the discovery of the female, in its early stages created conditions for the economic and therefore social supremacy of the female.

Later agricultural economy developed and passed into the hands of the male, but some of the cultural features of its early stages remained attached to it. The Indian masses, the tillers of the soil, by and large, have stuck to the idea of the mother goddess. It is a female deity who presides over the agricultural village of Kanthapura.

Our contradictory attitude towards the woman derives from this background of two cultures. We tend to view the woman in two diametrically opposite ways: she is seen both as socially inferior and as mother. Her social inferiority, originally an aspect of the male dominated ideology which came into being in support of the economy is sought to be mystified by relating her to the image of mother or *Sakti*, this image having originated in an economic structure dominated by the female but taken over by the operative ideology. The fact is that the operative ideology of our *Sanatana* Hindu social structure, male dominated that it has been as part of Brahmin domination, absorbed into its structure some of the sociological features and philosophical abstractions of a female dominated social structure in order to ratify and mask the existing order of male domination, this made the woman a participant in and prisoner of the male dominated ideology by compensating her on the ideological plane for what she lost in actuality. As Althusser, building on Marx's original use of the concept of ideology as 'illusory consciousness', defines it, ideology is 'a system . . . of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society'.<sup>5</sup> Althusser's emphasis is on the mystificatory element in ideology. 'Ideology,' he says, 'represents the imaginary relation of individuals to their real Conditions of existence'.<sup>6</sup> Its function is to assign roles to the agents of production. The issue of woman's economic and social inferiority and her simultaneous elevation in the form of mother or *Grihalakshmi* or *Sakti* is basically one of ideological mystification, that is, masking the reality with imaginary relation. This, then, is the basis of our feminine myth.

This image of feminine myth came under certain pressures when a new middle class began evolving from the interstices of the *Sanatana* Hindu social formation around 1850 when an alliance was struck between it and colonialism. What is significant is that the social aspirations of this middle class, in many ways, were new, but there was hardly any change in the ideological sphere. One of the cultural shifts which took place with the rise of this middle class was that Calcutta became the centre of culture. It is my submission that the rise of the Indian novel in English has to be seen in this perspective. Earlier, story-telling formed part of our agrarian culture: people would gather around a blacksmith's or a potter's working area, or of an evening around the village-community centre, and tales would go round. Some of these tales centred round the place: its past, the myths associated with it, and some, those recounted by the roving traders, for example, spoke of the far — away, the tales of trade adventures. The earlier narrative code contained elements of magic and miracle. With the rise of the middle class, the story telling shifted from the village to the *baitakkhana*, the sitting room of the middle class male. There was a corresponding shift in the narrative code: the elements of miracle and magic did not find favour with the middle class which cared more for information and their rational explanation. The rise of the Indian novel in English owes much to such writers as Bankim Chandra. The compulsions of the middle class led to its rise.

With the rise of the middle class there were certain changes in the social code, but, again, these did not reach deep and wide; the middle class, retained most of the ideological elements of the patriarchal hierarchical, Hindu social order, and that remained male-dominated. Any one reading Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Krishna Kant's Will* as a social document is likely to notice the contradictions underlying Bankim's treatment of the love of Rohini, the young widow. That the widow-problem posed a threat to the social order may be seen from the fact that the number of widows of less than fifteen years of age was over three lakhs. The Sati syndrome notwithstanding, many of these widows did slip. Bankim Chandra was confronting one of the social problems of his time. But nowhere in the novel, neither in its action nor in the direct observations of the author worked into it, there is any sanction given to Rohini's love. In fact, the whole thing is seen as a social evil. As opposed to it, the silent, worshipful love of Govindlal's wife, whose position Rohini seeks to usurp, is seen as the unifying tie of the Hindu society. Bankim's mind is hedged in by the tradition of SWAKIA love, love, that is, within the legitimacy of sacramental marriage. 'The primary and the Sati myth dharma of a woman', Bankim said, 'is devoting to her husband', elsewhere 'the woman is forgiving, kind-hearted, affectionate, and image of the divine'. In this scheme of things, there cannot be any place for Rohini's fulfilment as a woman qua woman. The middle class consciousness was split: even as the feminine myth continued to have a hold over the middle class consciousness, there entered into it new ideas in keeping with its changing complexion. B. B. Mazumdar tells us how, "the area of social emancipation of the upper class ladies dawned on the Thirteenth of April, 1862, when Keshav Chandra Sen took his wife to the ZORASANKO house to be by his side on the day of his ordination".<sup>7</sup> Alongside this can be set the record of an incident that took place years later, involving Satyendranath Tagore, his wife, and Manmohan Ghose. When Manmohan Ghose expressed a desire to see his friend's wife, Satyendranath had to literally smuggle him into the progressive Zorasanko house at the dead of night (*Jahur Barir Andarmchal*). Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, made private arrangements for the education of the female members of his family, but he did not encourage widow marriage. Balendranath Tagore's young widow was persuaded to come back to Calcutta and live in widowhood. There is on the one hand the attitude of the Hindu college-educated Madhusadan Dutta, representative of the new man of the Bengal renaissance; 'The happiness of a man who has an enlightened partner is quite complete'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, there is this observation of Margaret Urquhart, made round about the same time: Vivacity, bounce, and impulsiveness are considered

unbecoming even in a young maiden, and more so in a wife ..... sometimes by excessive curbing the natural effervescence of girlhood results in an almost cow-like passivity'.<sup>9</sup>

Tagore himself, it seems, could not escape from these contradictions inherent in our social system. He made an attempt, though, to break away from the myth of the women as mothers: for one thing, his heroines, the majority of them, do not conform to the mother archetype. In this respect he is by exact opposite of Sharatchandra Chatterjee the master in our fiction who specializes in the art of portraying woman as mother. Consider how effortlessly Sharatchandra's Parvatee of *Devadas* who slips into the role of mother in relation to her stepsons who are many years her senior in age recalls Chandramukhi. And when Devadas is in his fevered imagination, she is identified with his mother. There is no such compelling mother figure in Rabindranath. Yes, he did try to see woman under a new aspect. There is, for example, the character of Binodini in *Chokerbali*. There is a strangely modern assertiveness about this widow. Binodini is perhaps the first woman character in Bengali fiction, who claims an identity of her own, who claims love in her own right, even though she knows that for her, she being a widow, love is a violation of the social code. She is, indeed, a bold creation. Tagore was accused of tainting the moral fabric of the society for creating the character of Binodini. The intriguing question, however, is why Tagore in his portrayal of Binodini did not go the whole amorous hog, and give her the fulfilment of her love in terms of a life with the person she loved. He gave her, instead, the quality of self-denial a quality embedded in the feminine myth. This self-denial of the woman continues even to this day among some of our contemporary novelists. Tagore gives Binodini a character capable of rebelling against the social code, but then qualifies it by building into her character the quality of self-denial, of sacrifice, which really amounts to her acceptance of, and subjugation of herself to the social code. This is what she tells Behari whom she loves and who offers to wed her:

'What? Would you marry a widow?... If I accept you, I would destroy you in society, and I would myself never be able to keep my head high...You will not be happy.... All your glory will go, and I, too, will come to lose all my glory'.<sup>10</sup>

One wonders where this glory which she is apprehensive of losing comes from. Obviously, from the idea of myth in which she, too, is a participant. Corresponding to Binodini's self-denial, there is the affirmation of Asha, Mahendra's wife, who says to her husband,

"You have done no wrong; the fault is mine. You are my master.  
Chide me. Allow me a place at your feet".<sup>11</sup>

Binodini's radical gesture is subverted by the imagined glory of womanhood to which she aspires and by Asha's affirmation.

The same contradictions are to be found in Tagore's treatment of Bimala in *Ghareybairey*. She again is a boldly conceived character, a married woman who opens out to the point of seeking love out of wedlock. Potentially, it is a daring situation: a married woman seeks fulfillment of herself in her own right, independent of her husband. But as Tagore presents it, Bimala's quest or for that matter any such quest needs to be curbed. The action of the novel is designed to educate Bimala, that is, make her realize the folly of her quest. She is made to see that there is more enterprise in her coming back to her hearth, in finding her fulfillment as her husband's *Sahadharmini*, her husband's *dharma* being an enlightened form of Hinduism enlightened by his exposure to the Western education. To achieve this objective Tagore deliberately runs down Sandeep, the third man in the novel's triangle. Every care is taken to point out that Sandeep's glitter is fake, and that Nikhilesh represents a wholesomeness denied to Sandeep. Bimala has little choice in the matter, her freedom is illusory unless she happened to be a woman.

With a torch for the picaresque hero, which in any case her upbringing in the Hindu social system would not permit, Bimala's infatuation for Sandeep is doomed from the beginning. There is one character in Tagore, Damini of *Chaturanga*. Here is a woman who cuts away from the feminine myth. She lives through three male options, and cares for the man who would fulfill her. But Damini is the social promise, a literary construct, not a social reality and its realization.

How does the woman figure in contemporary fiction? Is the feminine myth still operating? Or is the woman disengaged from her myth? The reading of *Bhubaneshwari* suggests that the bourgeoisie have a vested interest in the survival of the myth of women. It is common among our contemporary novelists to posit the past as a sustaining norm against contemporary disorder. There is Ashapura Devi, for example. In *Pratham Pratishruti*, she gives a near-authentic portrayal of a woman belonging to a generation twice our elder, engaged in a struggle for identity. But Ashapura, when she comes to our times, in *Bakul Lata*, makes her new woman go back to the generation of her mother for her values. Why this looking back? One recalls Fraser's criticism of *The Waste Land*; Fraser suggests that what is required to set the waste land in order is not less of emancipation, but more of it. One could say the same thing about some of our contemporary writers who are keen to show how female liberation is likely to disturb social stability: they, in effect, plead for *status quo ante*. Here I will refer to two contemporary works of fiction — they bear pertinently on the questions raised herein. The first is Dibendu Palit's *Charitra*, the key characters of which are a very ordinary lower middle class husband, and his very ordinary friend who is a frequent visitor to their house. The wife both resents this man and feels attracted towards him. She plays her role as a *Grihalakshmi* and *Annapurna*, though the role sits heavy on her. One lonely afternoon she slips into a physical entente cordiale with this man. It is not that they are seen by the husband, or any of the neighbours, that way she is quite safe. The question is how this woman

comes to view this happening. There is some kind of fulfilment there-she gets a child in the bargain, a child she could not get from her impotent husband. But any sense of fulfilment that there may be, fulfilment *as a woman, has to be repressed; she cannot accord any recognition to it.* The role of woman as wife, hollow as it may be, has to continue. Dibendu Palit shows how the bourgeoisie still hang on to the feminine myth, even though this myth stands weakened from within.

There is an interesting short story, *Stannadaini*, written by Mahasweta Devi, which demonstrates how the feminine myth becomes a mode of exploitation; it is the story of a wet nurse in a traditional well-to-do Hindu household. While the daughters-in-law of the family give birth to one child after another, this wet nurse -I am not very happy with this expression of wet nurse - - nurtures the infants, gives them the suck. She has naturally to make arrangements that she remains in constant lactation. Every member of the family plays the game that she is the real mother to these children. She herself comes to believe in this myth. But her disillusionment comes when she falls sick and cannot serve the purpose for which she has been employed. Her mother image was a deliberate role creation, really had been. In *Hazarchurasir Ma*, a novel, Mahasweta Devi shows the emergence of a mother as an independent *Zoon politikhon*. This mother has lost her son, a political activist. But what makes it interesting is that instead of trying to sublimate her personal tragedy by adopting the role of a larger mother, a role accordant with the operative middle class ideology, she prepares for her liberation from her mother role to find her sublimation in a political consciousness. She does not come out as a *Sakti*, though the Bengali novels, genergally, tend to present a woman in situations analogous to that of the mother in *Hazarchurasir Ma* as sublimating her tragedy by adopting a more universal maternal loving kindness, and bestowing it on all to compensate for the loss of her own son. This has led to creating a convenient and acceptable sentimental myth. It is to her distinction that Mahasweta Devi explodes this myth -- the myth of woman as mother or even as *Sakti*. Do these novels indicate that the myth of woman, which for centuries has been lying embedded in our consciousness is finally disintegrating and that we might witness the emergence of woman not only with economic freedom, but as an independent being, independent in her thinking and her *dharma*?

In the time of greatest prosperity and power of the classical period, the Indian woman was what the artist made her, expected of her and asked her to live up to. He defined himself through her; the other as Simone Beauvoir puts it, "That she exists, the existential concept being totally suppressed or kept in abeyance made it very difficult to define her."<sup>12</sup> Hence all the mystery, the poetry and the romance. She is constantly likened to something or the other in the Kavyas --- a river, a rippling stream, a fragrance, a flower, a dream and what not? The metaphoric vocabulary is fully in use to describe the protean woman. Raja Rao, trying to define the ideal Indian woman, likens her to mother Ganga (the river Ganges) and quotes extensively from Jagannatha Bhatta's lyric poem *Gangalahari* in his novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*.

"Sole giver of pleasure to the young centre of holy waters.

Bright garland of three worlds."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the Indian history, in subtle ways, writes Shantha Krishnaswamy, "Indian woman's essential commitment to her religion and the institutions and rituals, has enabled her to be portrayed as the guardian of culture and religion. It is difficult to summarize the various images of women in Hinduism and Islam, the two dominant religions, through the ages. The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand, and on the other viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master."<sup>14</sup> The women are thrown into the whirlpool of a world along with the men and are burdened with a great many choices and responsibilities. They are caught in the counter-pulls of existence and impurity. Only the strongest survive. As a symbol not only of growth, life and fertility, but also of withdrawal, regression, decay and death, she is a powerful figure indeed. M. E. Derrett rightly observes:

"The typological experiences of these women have constant elements like an abrupt awakening, intense introspection, a stasis in time and action, and an abrupt ending with a conscious decision. The ending does not lead to a resolution of her problems, but the fictional shaping of a very specific kind of crisis seen through her eyes is rewarding, for it leads to inner enrichment, a sense of exhilaration and vicarious achievement as we see her battling through harsh reality. In a world of battle, between male versus female dominance: equality and liberation are two words used here. It is seen to be difficult for the women to reconcile these concepts with the reality of her life, bent down as she is by the weight of traditional Hindu values. The woman in the Indian novel often serves as the symbol of the seething discontent raging within the heart of the ordinary Indian."<sup>15</sup>

There are outstanding writers in regional languages who have won critical acclaim for their portrayals of the Indian women. In Assamese, we have Homen Bargohain, Nava Kant Barua, Umakanta Sharma, in Bengal there is Ashapura Devi with her disciple Pratibha Bose. Ones with Marxist trends are Narayana Sanyal, Bhaduri, Bimal Mitra and others. Shiv Kumar Joshi of Gujarat has written about the divorce problem in Anang Rag. There are host of women writers, such as Dhiruben Patel and Meenal Dixit. There are many more in Tamil (Janakiranam, Jayakanthan), Kannada and Marathi and among Indo-English writers of recent years Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande are well known today. Talking about the main problems that Indian women face, as compared with the western women, Shantha Krishnaswamy opines:

“In western countries, the women's issue is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual role. In India, for the majority, it is a question of stark survival. The few who have escaped the vicious existential circle through education and better opportunities also find themselves in a constant tussle with inevitable social mores with the opposite weight of tradition behind.”<sup>16</sup>

Linked inseparably to the Hindu worship of the sacred cow, Indian women as mothers have symbolized throughout the ages not only the ideal of motherhood, but also the life force itself and its perpetuation. The word *mata* (mother) carries a very strong affective charge, it is invariably linked with the sacred cow, *gaumata*.<sup>17</sup> And in recent times, “women have thought more in terms of nationalism than men, and they have a great sense of service to their country.”<sup>18</sup> The women are normally placed on pedestals and worshipped as goddesses (Shakti, Lakshmi, Kali etc.) in literature, history and society. “The classification of women into idealized stereotypes and eulogizing them is a hallmark of Sanskrit literature.”<sup>19</sup>

The *nayikas* or the heroines have classic virtues. There is no hint at any deviation whatsoever as they pass through the different stages of life as girls, wives, mothers and later as widows. After all Manu, the lawgiver had been explicit. Manu, who lived about the sixth century B.C., was the famous codifier of Hindu laws. According to him, the woman, the lowest caste, the *shudras*, must not perform any ritual before the sacrificial fire without her husband. He viewed her solely as subject mother and wife and these roles too were idealized. Manu says: “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. The women must never be independent.”<sup>20</sup> The novel in the western world focuses on the woman's ability to choose, while here the literary world pushes the women from one set of no-choices to another, from father to husband to son in fixed cycles of their lives. The discussion about her selfhood or personality (on which the western novel is so often centred) simply does not arise. “One might argue,” says Meenaksi Mukherjee, “that the classical ideals no longer obtain in the Indian context,”<sup>21</sup> But in actual literary practice, numerous characters are found to adhere to classic prototypes, “especially the women of fiction who persistently re-enact the suffering, sacrificing, role of Sita or Savitri.”<sup>22</sup> The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand and on the other, viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master.

In the Vedic hymns, she is extolled as her husband's partner, before the sacred fire, in all rituals. But in practice, she is regarded impure and unfit to perform higher religious functions as that of the priest. In Koran we find the women in high esteem having equal rights to education and property, and again in practice, nothing as such is found. So much so that she is denied where the entering of a mosque is concerned. “Marriage, the one religious sacrament in which she is allowed to participate is the *summun bonum*, the coveted career, the alliance between two families, not a free selection between two adult human beings. It is an indissoluble sacrament for her (not for her husband) blessed by religious rites in which she is not generally consulted.”<sup>23</sup>

*Pativrata*, the code of chastity, is the dominant attitude of Indian women towards marriage in all sections of society. “Marriage and motherhood are considered essential for the salvation of women.”<sup>24</sup> Minoos Masani relates in *Our Growing Human Family* the tale of Shubhru from the *Mahabharata* of “a religious woman who idealized chastity. She learns on her deathbed that she may forfeit heaven unless her body is consecrated by the sacrament of marriage. This may sound archaic outside the Indian context but it reveals how certain traditional prejudices about women are deeply embedded in the Indian psyche. Marriage is rendered a complex of obligations religious, moral, social and economic. The marriage of the woman is to the family, to the community and not to the individual. Once married, she has to forget all personal ambitions. Once in the family, all her needs and necessities are to be fulfilled in the family. She is made to cut off from the social life to be confined to the home, the temple and company of women relatives. Rama Mehta says in *Inside the Huveli*, “the *purdah* system emanated from the feminine code of modesty, not as an imposition from man.”<sup>25</sup> Rabindranath Tagore says in *Wings of Death*:

“Amid my own untidiness I think in wonder;

In the heart of creation

Flow these two streams of man and woman.

Man gathers round him rubbish;

Woman comes and constantly cleans it away.”<sup>26</sup>

Raja Rao writes in *The Serpent and The Rope*,

“Woman is the earth, air water, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulation of space, the knowing in the knowledge; the woman is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mount air stream, the woman is that which seek against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha, Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act; woman that which reminds man of that which he is and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods: inherence, the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born. Woman rules, for it is she, the universe.”<sup>27</sup>

Just as there is no recognized male world there is no female world either, and art and literature should be honest to reality. The male dominated society where men are unaware of their neglect of women as persons, it is

only natural that women should be treated as objects, as commodities adding to the well being of man. But if we wake up to the fact that was a wrong perspective we should also wake up to the fact that the new western mode of literature “of the women by the women for the women” is also wrong, bending over backwards to be sexist in a reverse manner.

On the other hand there has developed, in these days of women's liberation movement a completely new stream of women writers in the western world, who write mainly for male readership selling the female body as a commodity, using their powerful pens to titillate the reader evoking pornographic images. There are a host of such popular writers crowding the Wheeler's Stalls, Jacqueline Susanne, Anais Nin, Ericha Jong and many more. Women have written bestsellers earlier as well, Agatha Christie, the mystery queen, or Dorothy Sayers handling Dante with her right hand and detective fiction with her left. But pornography was the special area of male writers, making easy money usually under the cover of a pseudonym. What made these women come forward and produce such literature? And under their “own” names too in India also we have felt the vibrations of this wave - with the pornographic writings of people like Uma Vasudev or Kamala Das, the latter being a serious and competent poet in English and, it is believed, a serious writer in Malayalam as well. But in Malayalam she uses another name, a pseudonym, Madhavi Kutti. That, one would think as significant in this context, for Mother tongue has an inhibiting quality. Writing in English allows them an extra freedom that writing in the mother tongue does not; mother tongue represents all the social and cultural mores we are bound by. It is difficult to write pornostuff under your own name and in your own mother tongue. She does not, we are told, write pornographic stuff in Malayalam like she does in English.

Women have forever been tellers of bedtime stories to their children, and grandchildren even in their so called female role as village-gossips they have excelled in the art of narration. (Think of the scene in *Pather Panchali* when Indir Thakrun is telling the story of monsters to the children in the trembling lamp light or of the handicapped woman Mala in the *Boatman of Padma* who is a captivating story teller for adults as well). In these popular writings, I find them again in their traditional roles, writing romances like those of Barbara Cartland or the Mills and Boons stories. It is the same as telling bedtime stories to grownups and the writing of the dirty books is probably comparable to the village gossip-stuff. When life is confined to the boring domestic routine of the kitchen and the bedroom, it is perhaps only natural to try to escape through wish-fulfilling tales, either of princesses or of prostitutes, both equally far and unfamiliar to the uneventful regular mundane life of a middleclass housewife.

However, there is one common point in Indian fiction quite irrespective of language and region. This one characteristic that is noticeable both in fiction by men and by women, is the archetypal mother figure. Not the terrible mother, but the *shakti* --- giving, sustenance --- giving, stable figure of security representing Indian womanhood in person. In Bankimchandra we have seen her, in Saratchandra she appears very often, in Tagore, too, we have seen her, in Tarashankar we have seen her often, in Premchand we have seen her, in Pendse, in Shankar Pillai, in U. R. Anantha Murthy and we have seen her in Ashapura and Mahashweta as well. The eternal mother is a common figure appearing in both the world of female writers as well as of male writers. This archetypal mother is a reality in the Indian social scene. She holds the world together, supplies moral courage to the men, just as she once supplied milk to her children for basic sustenance. This is the one point where writers all over India agree, across time and region sex and language; this makes the duality even more obvious.

The myth concerning men and women in the patriarchal society of India has been explored in many of Deshpande's stories and novels, and they are obviously indicative of how the mythical tradition of Indian society has changed considerably with the passage of time and now in the changed scenario writers are questioning the relevance of traditional icons because they are the creation of a particular and exclusive mind-set of people which fail miserably to appreciate and understand aspirations, dreams and desires of women. Not only epic myths but also prevalent social myths are the result of the long traditional system of exclusiveness founded upon false notions and presumptions.

Over the years and in between her novels, Deshpande has written several volumes of short stories which run a parallel course to her longer works of fiction. Of the novelists writing in English in India, she is one writer who has kept a constant flow of short stories going, stories that serve as a ground for experimentation of themes and ideas, attitudes and narrative approaches. Five of these volumes have been published by the Writers' Workshop, Calcutta. Of these, *The Legacy* (1978) also happens to be her first published book. Three volumes *It Was Dark*, *It Was the Nightingale* and *The Miracle* appeared in 1986 clearly indicating that the writing of the stories spreads over several years. The fifth volume brought out by the Writers' Workshop is *The Stone Women and Other Stories*, which came out in 2000. In 1993, Penguin (India) brought out a volume of short stories *The Intrusion and Other Stories*. Of the nineteen stories in this collection, five had appeared earlier in *The Legacy*, five in *It Was Dark*, one in *It Was the Nightingale* and four were later to be included in *The Stone Women* (in which the stories have a thematic connectedness). The title story ‘*The Intrusion*’ first appeared in *The Legacy* and the theme is a continuation of the one reflected in *It Was Dark*. Deshpande's *Collected Stories* Volume - I has also been published by Penguin.<sup>28</sup> The issues which are reflected in the stories are either early formations of the themes she was later to develop more fully in her novels, or explorations of alternative views on the same subject. Family, marriage and bereavement are some of the dominant concerns. Social issues like female infanticide or foeticide and rape also feature in some of the stories. Cultural and social attitudes which have evolved over a period of time are critiqued. Sex and sexuality – aberrations, extramarital involvements, even lesbianism – find a place here.

*The Stone Women and Other Stories* takes up myths from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* to reinterpret and relate them to the situations of contemporary life. Being in the centre women characters are, more often than not, visualized in terms of their relationship with men. Nevertheless, even while dealing with the problems of love, marriage and sex, women writers perhaps present more authentic picture of several other aspects of women's lives.

A discerning reader of Shashi Deshpande's fiction is familiar with her liberal use of myths in weaving stories. In *The Stone Women*, myth is the technique adopted by the author. Myths for her have a specific purpose. "Myths", says Ms. Deshpande, "have given us a moral framework by which we live."<sup>29</sup> The readers are transported into the mythological world of the *Mahabharata*. On her choice of the stories from the *Mahabharata*, she says, "*The Mahabharata* stories have an important place in all our lives, but it is getting less and less known."<sup>30</sup> In most of the stories the reader is face to face with the celebrated women characters of the great Indian epic. These women namely, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Amba, Gandhari and so on are illustrious icons of Indian mythology. These are the characters who are admired, adored and idealized for their perfect feminine character. *The Stone Women* is a book of reminiscence. By adopting a refreshingly new approach, the author relates the past to find its meaning in the present. This she does by approximating the myths to the contemporary women's experiences and thus by reinterpreting them. In her approach she thus moves from femininity to Feminism. While doing so, she, on the one hand foregrounds the immense influence that myths wield on Indian life and on the other, makes the characters credible through the authenticity of the mythical context. The angelic halo that surrounds the women characters of these stories blends perfectly with the cultural ethos of India. Commenting on the importance of myths and the purpose they serve in real life Shashi Deshpande writes in the 'Afterword' to the book.

"Myths are still important to us. We do not want to demolish them, we need them to live by; they have shaped our ideas for a great many years, they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. In India, specially, myths have an extraordinary vitality, continuing to give people some truths about themselves, about the human condition. What women writers are doing today is not a rejection of the myths, but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them. We are looking for a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them, trying to discover what is relevant to our lives today."<sup>31</sup>

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